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Feasting like Royalty in a Time of Famine: Reflections on the Meaning and Composition of the Feast in Gen 43:15–34

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Abstract: This investigation of the composite text of the feast in Gen 43 explores how Joseph's banquet with his brothers—and the placement of Joseph's cup in Gen 44—functions as performative action in establishing the relationships between the commensal parties. In this way, the feast takes part in the larger story's narrative thread of the complex reconciliation of the brothers. The argument explores the nature of this meal from several angles: (1) insights provided by anthropological theory on power dynamics at feasts, (2) illumination cast by ancient comparative texts, especially related to Persian feasting, and (3) light shed on the feast's meaning by the significance of the cup in Persian feasts, given the cup's role in Gen 44 to concretize the feast's performative action in Gen 43:31–34.

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Feasting like Royalty in a Time of Famine: Reflections on the Meaning and Composition of the Feast in Gen 43:15–34

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Introduction

Matters of food drive the plot of the Joseph Story. One might even argue that the Joseph Story »actualizes« core themes—group identity, hierarchy, trust, and reconciliation—in events of provision, famine, and feasting.¹ This essay focuses on one such example, Gen 43:15–34, which offers a rich presentation of aspects of feasting including gifts, washing, differences in portions, separate tables, and conspicuous alcoholic consumption, all ending in ambivalence.²

What is the meaning of the feast in Gen 43: it is feasting, but to what end? This essay explores the nature of this meal from several angles: (1) insights provided by anthropological theory on feasting concerning power dynamics at the feast, (2) illumination cast by ancient comparative texts, especially related to Persian feasting on various elements of this banquet, and (3) light shed on the on the feast's meaning by the significance of the cup in Persian feasts,³ given the cup's role in Gen 44 to concretize the feast's performative action in Gen 43:31–34.

My investigation will demonstrate that the banquet functions as performative action for the commensal parties. In the earliest layer, the feast forms an

1 Cf. Katie M. Heffelfinger, »From Bane to Blessing: The Food Leitmotif in Genesis 37–50,« *JSOT* 40 (2016): 297–320, here 298 n. 2, provides statistics on the frequency of the theme's appearance. She argues (»ibid.«: 298), »Thus, food functions as a leitmotif in the story. It is used to signal the presence of material relevant to a primary theme of the narrative.« See also Thomas Römer, »Deux Repas »en Miroir« dans L'histoire de Joseph (Gn 37–50),« *RHPR* 93 (2013): 15–27.

2 This final element contains significant irony: they drink and become drunk together without the brothers knowing the reason. The only other positive occurrence of the combination of verbs appears in Song 5:1; in Jer 25:27 the drinking is followed by falling and vomiting.

3 For connections between the Persian period and the Joseph story, cf. Hyun Chul Paul Kim, »Reading the Joseph Story (Genesis 37–50) as a Diaspora Narrative,« *CBQ* 75 (2013): 219–238, here 221; 228–230.

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intrinsic part of the larger story's narrative thread of the complex reconciliation of the brothers.⁴ Both the ongoing struggles for ascendancy among the brothers highlighted in Joseph's dreams in Gen 37 and the brothers' domination and sale of Joseph hang vividly in the background of this feast in Gen 43. Now that Joseph is enshrined in the halls of Egyptian power, this festive banquet embodies the reconciliation and reversal/fulfillment of the power dynamics at work in the »family«. Secondary layers both fill out elements of brotherly hierarchy and good will and move the accent of the feast to include separation between the Hebrews and the Egyptians.

1 Compositional Background

Several comments on the compositional fractures of Gen 43:15–34 indicate the repeated and changing importance of the role of the feast in the redaction history of the Joseph Story.⁵ First, the note on Simeon in v. 23 is surprisingly undeveloped and comes in the midst of a section that is itself surrounded by exact doublets in

4 Römer, »Repas«; Heffelfinger, »Bane« (earlier Rüdiger Lux, *Josef: der Auserwählte unter seinen Brüdern* [Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2001], 89) have noted important connections with the earlier meal, which is not a feast, shared by the brothers in 37:25, while Joseph remains captive in the cistern.

5 The Joseph story constitutes a controversial topic of discussion between, on one end of the spectrum, Neo-Documentarians, and on the other end, scholars adjudging the story as having grown from an independent core as (or into) a diaspora novella in the postexilic period. For example, B. Schwarz separates the Joseph story into classical J and E strands (Baruch J. Schwartz, »J and E in the Joseph Saga« presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature [New Orleans, November 2009]). On the other hand, for Konrad Schmid, »Die Josephgeschichte im Penta-teuch,« in *Abschied vom Jahwisten: Die Komposition des Hexateuch in der jüngsten Diskussion*, eds. Jan C. Gertz et al., BZAW 314 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2002): 83–118, the story comes to link the ancestral narratives of Gen 12–36 with the Moses story in Ex 2 and following. It is dated to the Persian period at the earliest by Römer, »Repas«: 20. Wöhrle instead places the origins in the Northern Kingdom prior to 722 BCE as a story about leadership among Jacob's sons and their struggle to accept Joseph's leading role, though it later came to incorporate divergent views of life in exile. (Jakob Wöhrle, »Joseph in Egypt: Living under Foreign Rule according to the Joseph Story and Its Early Intra- and Extra-Biblical Reception,« in *Between Cooperation and Hostility: Multiple Identities in Ancient Judaism and the Interaction with Foreign Powers*, eds. Rainer Albertz and Jakob Wöhrle, JSJSup 11 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013]: 53–72.) Ede's recent monograph on the Joseph narrative posits an originally pre-Priestly narrative found in chaps. 37, 39–41* dependent on the ancestral narrative that grows redactionally over time. Her analysis leads to a complex layering of chapter 43 (Franziska Ede, *Die Josefsgeschichte: literarkritische und redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Entstehung von Gen 37–50*, BZAW 485 [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016]), 243; cf. also Christoph Levin, *Der Jahwist*, FRLANT 157 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 294 f.

v. 17b and v. 24a: »Then the man brought the men to the house of Joseph.« This section likely constitutes an addition, as noted by the recent monograph by Ede.⁶ It emphasizes the brothers' fear and the hint of goodwill in Simeon's liberation. A second doublet appears in vv. 25 and 26 with regard to the gift: in one case the brothers prepare it, and in the second they bring it to the house. The report of them *re-entering* the house in v. 26 also suggests redactional activity.⁷ A third doublet appears in the brothers' bowing to Joseph in 26bβ and 28b, which adds support to viewing the text between them as an editorial addition.

Other suggestions of the appearance of redactional activity prove less compelling. On the basis of the similarities with 45:1–2, one may argue that 43:30–31 may be later.⁸ However, the similarity in the motif to the weeping in 42:24 may mitigate against the necessity of a composition-critical operation. Second, a number of interpreters consider Benjamin's presence in the story a later addition. Such a position has considerable implications for the feast: the seating in v. 33 would be different, and the comment on Benjamin's extraordinarily large portion would be later, as would the reason for Joseph's weeping. Basically the whole section from vv. 29–34 could only consist of 31b–32 and the last clause of 34. In any case, once this visit to Egypt is viewed as a *second* visit, I find it convincing that Benjamin would be part of the troop. Otherwise scant motivation for multiple visits arises, especially because Simeon's role is so miniscule and unexpected.⁹

The final section of v. 31 through v. 34 that depict the feast itself also likely presents a compositionally complex text in one place. The remark on the seating arrangements including a group of Egyptians in the second half of v. 32, concluding with the narrator's explanation of the reason for separate Hebrew and Egyptian tables, comes as a surprise, and as will be seen below, fits particularly well in a Persian-period context. Until v. 32 nothing indicates that any Egyptians partake in the feast.

In sum, there does appear to be a unified base text in vv. 15–17, 24–26α, 28b–32α, 33–34: The brothers come before Joseph in Egypt; he orders his steward to take them to Joseph's house for lunch. The steward does this with expected hospitality. The brothers prepare their tribute. When Joseph enters, the brothers bow to him. He hides himself to weep. He returns and has the food served, then they eat and drink together.

6 Cf. Ede, *Josefsgeschichte*, 243; Levin, *Jahwist*, 294 f.

7 Thus, the abovementioned insertion may have included v. 25.

8 Ede, *Josefsgeschichte*, 239, states: »Dann aber liegt die Vermutung nicht fern, dass es sich bei den Formulierungen in Gen 43,30–31 um eine nachträgliche Vorwegnahme von Gen 45,1–2 handeln könnte.«

9 This could support a source rather than a redactional solution for *these two visits*.

These signs of later redactional activity in the feasting verses point to repeated, ongoing interest in the feast as a motif through which to define the nature of relations between Joseph, his brothers, and the Egyptians. In other words, it carried the interest of the text's early readers in such a way that a number of compositionally secondary concerns congeal into the feast now present in the final form. In order to highlight the importance of the elements of the feast, both in the original layer and in the later redactions, I will first take a detour to introduce an anthropological lens for interpreting the biblical feasts, which will serve to highlight important symbolic aspects of the banquet.

2 The Meanings of Feasts

A feast can be identified as a communal meal bearing a number of special marks such as special items on the menu, specific seating arrangements, music and dancing, and other elements.¹⁰ Beyond the mere identification of a feast, one can also consider what a particular feast means. The meaning of a feast often consists in the way it displays, enacts, and negotiates power dynamics. Anthropologist Michael Dietler understands feasts, in essence, as »... the practices by which individuals create, maintain, and contest positions of power and authority within systems structured in these ways and, in the pursuit of their conflicting interests, transform the structures of the system themselves.«¹¹

His focus on the centrality of power illuminates the issues in the Joseph story as a whole and in the feast of 43:31–34 in particular. Thus, consideration of how

10 Cf. Janling Fu and Peter Altmann, »Feasting: Backgrounds, Theoretical Perspectives, and Introductions,« in *Feasting in the Archaeology and Texts of the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East*, eds. Peter Altmann and Janling Fu (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014): 1–31, here 16. »... taking a cue from structural linguistics, a feast stands out as marked in its time and place; that is, it has characteristics that set it apart from the differently marked, normal, everyday meals.«

11 Michael Dietler, »Theorizing the Feast: Rituals of Consumption, Commensal Politics, and Power in African Contexts,« in *Feasts: Archaeological and Ethnographic Perspectives on Food, Politics, and Power*, eds. M. Dietler and B. Hayden, Smithsonian Series in Archaeological Inquiry (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 2001): 65–114, here 66. Further lenses for understanding feasting can be found, e. g., Fu and Altmann, »Feasts«: 15; in the other essays in Michael Dietler and Brian Hayden, eds., *Feasts: Archaeological and Ethnographic Perspectives on Food, Politics, and Power*, Smithsonian Series in Archaeological Inquiry (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 2001); earlier Mary Douglas, »Deciphering a Meal,« *Daedalus* 101 (1972): 61–81; in biblical studies: Nathan MacDonald, *Not Bread Alone: The Uses of Food in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Peter Altmann, *Festive Meals in Ancient Israel: Deuteronomy's Identity Politics in Their Ancient Near Eastern Context*, BZAW 424 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 42–54.

power dynamics can be worked out in feasting can assist interpretation. Dietler identifies three primary categories of feasts:

(1) The »empowering feast«, which describes feasts in which the host intends to acquire especially symbolic capital.¹² These seek to effect change.

(2) The »patron-role feast«. Such feasts intend to maintain a given differential in status by giving a feast for those who depend on the hostess's (the patroness's) benefaction. In such cases, the guests cannot reciprocate by hosting a feast of their own to repay the debt to the hostess. They therefore pay off their debt through allegiance to the hostess.

(3) The diacritical (or »separative«) feast describing a feast among elite peers. This kind of feast aims to retain in-group power over the excluded (and thereby) liminal outsiders and underlings. Here, reciprocity between initiates supports their special connections to one another, fostering one kind of shared identity.

These categories allow for more subtle differentiation on the way that power is exerted and distributed through the feast. An inquiry about Gen 43's relationship with these categories will show that it combines elements of the second (patron-role) and third (diacritical).

3 Observations on Feasting in the Text

In order to view Gen 43 through Dietler's grid, this section makes some basic observation of Gen 43 compared to other ancient feasts depictions with regard to invitations, time and location of the feast, participation, consumed items, and hosting.

3.1 Invitation

Feasting scenes in ancient Near Eastern traditions quite often begin with an invitation. This can be seen best in the Ugarit Rapi'uma text,¹³ where El invites the *Rapiuma* to the banquet at his house. The invitations of Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly in Prov 9:3–6,15–17 provide a second, biblical comparison.

Turning to Gen 43, the treatment of the feasting event actually begins in vv. 16–17, though not with an invitation: When Joseph saw his brothers: »Then he said to the one over his house, »Bring the men to the house and slaughter a

¹² These categories follow our understanding of Dietler in Fu and Altmann, »Feasting«: 22f.

¹³ KTU 1.21.II.1–3, repeated in II. 9–11, and also in KTU 1.22 II.2–4,18–20.

slaughter¹⁴ and prepare,¹⁵ for with me the men will eat at noon.« So the man did as Joseph said. The man brought the men to the house of Joseph.« This is not a true invitation. Joseph does not speak to the brothers, but issues a command to his steward.¹⁶

Furthermore, the brothers had already arrived in Egypt, and they are escorted without voicing assent to attend the feast. Joseph's command belies the obvious power-differential of the relationship: the brothers have few options but to accompany the steward to Joseph's house. Furthermore, Joseph offers a feast in this period of great hunger, incredibly desirous to the hungry Bedouins.¹⁷

3.2 Preparations

Feasts generally raise the anticipation of enjoyment, but the brothers display fear. Their hesitancy is articulated clearly in the redactional vv. 18–24, which concretizes an irony nascent in v. 16. The language of »slaughter a slaughter« in v. 16 indicates tense speculation: the brothers may *be* the slaughter itself rather than those consuming its meat. This meaning would be consistent with the various contexts and usage of טבח in the rest of the Hebrew Bible. Though joyous occasions, and perhaps in part *because* of this fact, feasts also raise the possibility of betrayal. Attendees should eat as the enactment and experience of connection, but one party can abuse this vulnerability and violate the other—as in the most famous of examples with Judas and Jesus.¹⁸

In any case, the secondary appearance of Simeon is a sign of good faith added by a later redactor and reducing the tension in the story. Finally, another set of preparations appear in v. 24: the brothers receive water to wash their feet and the steward feeds their donkeys. As a result, Joseph provides the brothers with many indications of his intent to care for them as a proper host.

¹⁴ The verb טבח appears in Deut 28:31; 1Sam 25:11; Jer 11:19; 51:40; Prov 9:2; meaning »to kill off«; Jer 25:34; Ezek 21:15; Ps 37:14; Lam 2:21; Exod 21:37. On the noun see below n. 22.

¹⁵ With meals: Ps 78:20; 1Chr 9:22; 12:40; Exod 16:5; Prov 6:8; 30:25; Nah 2:4.

¹⁶ Correctly noted by Ede, *Josefsgeschichte*, 234.

¹⁷ For a more detailed consideration of the issues of famine, cf. Peter Altmann, »Feast and Famine—Lack as a Backdrop for Plenty,« in *Feasting in the Archaeology and Texts of the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East*, eds. Peter Altmann and Janling Fu (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014): 149–178.

¹⁸ This motif appears in the Akkadian Etana epic, where a serpent and eagle each go hunting and then share their prey with each other's young, until the eagle eats the serpent's young. Cf. COS 1.131.

Dietler's matrix highlights a clear power differential. The elements thus far point toward a patron-role feast that attempts to draw the brothers further into a patron-client relationship, rendering them increasingly dependent on him, especially as unprotected foreigners in Egypt.

3.3 The Time

Why feast at noon? In the command to his steward in v. 16, Joseph announces that the meal will take place at noon. This odd time designation reappears in v. 25. Feasting only otherwise takes place at this hour in 1Kgs 20:16, where Ben-hadad drinks with the supporting kings while besieging Samaria. That banquet focuses on consumption of alcohol (perhaps involved in the folly of his responses to Ahab)—also a key element here.¹⁹ Two interpretive possibilities arise: (1) The time symbolizes the kinds of deeds that take place at that hour. For example, evil deeds occur under the mantle of darkness. Joseph has no such intentions, despite the brothers' considerable suspicion. In this case the time designation provides readers with a foreshadowing of the denouement: Joseph means it well with his brothers.

(2) Another, non-exclusive possibility may relate to a particular portrayal of Persian feasting. The third century CE report of Athenaeus references comments on Persian royal feasting by Heracleides from the fourth century BCE:²⁰ »they remain nearly half the day in attendance at the feast.« In short, Heracleides depicts a long and substantial feast. Without explicitly stating the length of the banquet, the double reference to the feast beginning at noon in Gen 43 may indicate that they would then feast for half a day, quite significant in a time of hunger.²¹

3.4 The Provisions—Meat and Alcohol

In v. 16 Joseph commands the steward: »... and slaughter a slaughter«, containing significant ambiguity. Only in Lady Wisdom's invitation does the nominal form of טבח take on positive connotations as the animal for a human feast. In Prov 7:22,

¹⁹ The daytime meal in Ruth 2:14 may also have occurred around the same time, but it is simply referred to as »the time of eating« (עַתָּה הָאֲכִיל), and it is a mundane meal.

²⁰ Heracleides, *persica*, from Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, 4.145.

²¹ Feasting may also be depicted as extending over a period of days, such as the seven-day feast in Esth 1:5; also e. g. 1Kgs 8:65.

the young fool falling into the adulterous woman's trap *is instead* the metaphorical ox to be slaughtered, much like in armies of the nations in Isa 34:2.²²

As noted above, the feast in Gen 43 recalls the brothers' meal in Gen 37:25, eaten immediately before Joseph goes off to slavery in Egypt.²³ The connection between the scenes of a meal and accompanying fear—and of enslavement in the redactional v. 18—solidifies the irony. Similarly, the nature of the »slaughter« hangs in the balance in Gen 37 as well: would they murder their brother, or merely slaughter a goat?²⁴ Now they experience a similar insecurity.

It eventually becomes clear that the main course consists of some kind of meat—a dish that, along with consumption of alcohol, signifies the festive nature of a meal.²⁵

Neither are the beverages specified: the only mention of their presence comes at the end of v. 34: »They drank, and they became drunk with him.«²⁶ This shared drinking presents the greatest sign of the attendees drawing together in the feast. Only at this point does the text indicate any possible building of trust, likely supported by alcohol's effectiveness in wearing down their inhibitions.

The lavishness of the meal itself, suggested by the meat and alcohol, does not constitute the focus of this scene. However, given the persistent lack of food in the region that brings the brothers to Egypt in the first place, having enough—and dining near royalty—certainly sets this group apart, providing the feast with a sense of Dietler's diacritical feast. Furthermore, while the menu and considerable drinking do denote its festive nature, the dynamics of the relationships are also marked by the food in the portion sizes: Benjamin's enormous helpings. There is, then, plenty that separates the parties: this time it is actions by the host, similar to such dynamics in other places in the Joseph story.²⁷

The provisioning, especially in v. 34 where Joseph decides the nature of each portion, emphasizes Joseph's role as patron. His ability to choose enacts his place as the key figure, giving him the ability to designate, or rather affirm, Benjamin's special status.²⁸

²² Other texts include Isa 34:6; 53:7; 65:12; Jer 50:27; Ezek 21:10,28. This ambiguity recalls Gen 37:20 (cf. v. 33 for Jacob's response), where the brothers consider covering up the murder of Joseph by saying that a wild beast ate him.

²³ Heffelfinger, »Bane«: 310; Römer, »Repas«.

²⁴ The term is שחַת rather than טבח.

²⁵ לחם in vv. 25 and 31 designates »food« rather than the more specific »bread«.

²⁶ Also in Gen 9:21; Jer 25:27; Hag 1:6.

²⁷ Cf. also the added mentions of Benjamin throughout the chapter, e. g., vv. 14,15,16,29, and the topic of discussion in vv. 1–10.

²⁸ The issue of the »abomination to the Egyptians« from v. 32 is discussed below in 3.5.2, I see little reason to conclude that this matter had something to do with the menu.

3.5 The Seating Arrangements

This text emphasizes the placement of the host and guests in this chapter. While this theme makes a minor appearance in 1Sam 9:22, Gen 43:32 lays out partitioned eating, which serves to distinguish between the guests. The earliest layer reads: »So they served him alone and them alone.« The focus here is entirely on the distinction between Joseph and his brothers.

A number of questions arise with regard to the separate »tables«. While the brothers sit separately from Joseph both in 37:25 and here in 43:32,²⁹ a significant difference is Benjamin's presence among the brothers here. Thus, the potential antagonism is not separated cleanly by table.³⁰

No elaborate theory of feasting is required to remark that this feature clearly indicates the differences in the status of each group. However, in Dietler's terms, this marks the patron-role nature of the feast.³¹

At a later point in the compositional history of the text, the further group of otherwise unidentified Egyptians is added: »And the Egyptians eating with him alone. For the Egyptians were not able to eat with the Hebrews. For it was an abomination to Egypt.«³² A simple power differential does not explain why there came to be *three* different tables nor the comment on the »abomination«.

3.5.1 Separate Tables

Possible insight comes from placing this separate eating into conversation with ancient Near Eastern and Greek depictions of Persian feasts. The Persian king is often described as eating separate from his subjects.³³ This notion concurs with depictions of individual royal feasting in the ancient Near East, which accords

²⁹ Heffelfinger, »Bane«: 310.

³⁰ The contrast of the separate tables with the twice-mentioned »with him« (עִמּוֹ) is best understood through a broad conception of the phrase in the ancient Near East: sharing the table does not literally mean that they all sat at the same table. It could also concern the leftovers of the feast.

³¹ There is one striking scene in the Baal Cycle where the hero, Baal, eats alone after his victory over Yamm, which contrasts with the well-attended banquet after the completion of his house. One was not meant to celebrate alone. In this way, the feast of Gen 43 might be thought to leave the plot unfinished, leaning into the following events of the narrative. This solitary feasting differs significantly from the depiction of a single feaster on, e.g., the Late Bronze Age Megiddo Ivory, at least in the aspect that there are still numerous individuals consuming.

³² Following the BHS note, as the *lectio difficilior*.

³³ A. J. S. Spawforth, *The Court and Court Society in Ancient Monarchies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 44.

with the conception of the original text of v. 32. However, the only comparable ancient text detailing *three* separate groups in a feast is again Heracleides:

But of those who are invited to eat with the [Persian] king, some dine outside, and every one who chooses can see them, but some dine inside with the king: and even these do not actually eat with him; but there are two rooms opposite to one another, in one of which the king eats his meal, and in the other the guests eat theirs. ... And when the king has a drinking party, (and he has one very often,) his guests are about a dozen in number, and when they have supped, the king by himself, and his guests by themselves, ... then they drink with him, but they do not have the same wine.³⁴

Read in light of the inclusion of the redactional material, Joseph plays the role of the Persian king. For the other two groups, the analogy is less clear: the brothers may be those eating inside; and the Egyptians eating outside, but this may be reversed. In any case, the drinking session is reported after the meal (like a symposium), and they, needless to say, a dozen of them without the Egyptian table, become drunk together, highlighting the diacritical nature of (minimally) the drinking.

3.5.2 Abomination

The narrator explains in v. 32b: »For the Egyptians were not able to eat food with the Hebrews, for it was an abomination for Egypt.« There are two biblical texts often related to this statement:

Gen 46:34: And you shall say, your servants are men
of cattle from our youth until now,
both we and our fathers.
Thus, may we dwell in the land of Goshen,
for all shepherds of the flock are *the abomination*
of Egypt.

ואמרתם אנשי מקנה היו עבדיך
מנעורינו ועד־עתה
גם־אנחנו גם־אבותינו
בעבור תשבו בארץ גשן
כי־תועבת מצרים כל־רעה צאן:

And Exod 8:22 [ET: 26]:

And Moses said, it is not right to do thus,
for it is the abomination of Egypt
[if] we sacrifice to YHWH our God:
if we sacrifice *the abomination of Egypt* before their eyes,
then will they not stone us?

ויאמר משה לא נכון לעשות כן
כי תועבת מצרים
נובח ליהוה אלהינו
הן נובח את־תועבת מצרים לעיניהם
ולא יסקלנו:

34 Heracleides, *persica*, from Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, 4.145.

In Gen 46 and Ex 8, the animals themselves, whether herded or consumed, fit well as an understanding of the תועבה; this explanation does not work for Gen 43.³⁵

Two problems arise: one historical and the other literary.

Historically, the Egyptian evidence indicates that Egyptians themselves *generally* had no qualms with the consumption of beef, mutton, or goat, though sheep do not appear on lists of high-value foods.³⁶ Only in some limited times at limited localities were any dietary prohibitions maintained.³⁷

Most ancient discussion of Egyptian dietary prohibitions arises from *Greek* authors, who, in Egyptologist Y. Volokhine's words, »contributed to the invention of the debate about Egyptian dietary prohibitions ...«,³⁸ and for whom comparativism lie at the root of such prohibitions, much like in Gen 43.³⁹ However, the foodstuff itself as the basis for prohibition paralleling a Greek concern could provide some indication of the historical location of Gen 46:34 and Ex 8:22. But with regard to understanding Gen 43:32, it provides little help: this focus on foodstuffs does not explain why there were three separate tables.⁴⁰

The literary problem is that the banquet takes place in Egypt in an »Egyptian« residence. Therefore, why would this household serve meals abhorrent to Egyptians?

35 Rashi interprets all three texts with this category, pointing the reader to Onkelos, which refers the תועבה to the category of animal consumed. Cf. Aron Pinker, »Abomination to Egyptians« in Genesis 43:32, 46:34, and Exodus 8:22,« *OTE* 22 (2009): 151–174, here 153. Among recent works, Ede also places the two texts from Genesis in the same redactional layer: Ede, *Josefsgeschichte*, 255. Generally speaking, the term תועבה in reference to dining habits may arise from the use of the term in Deut 14, where it is also applied to the contents of the menu.

36 Yuri Volokhine, »So-Called ›Dietary Prohibitions‹ in Pharaonic Egypt: Discourses and Practices,« in *The Larger Context of the Biblical Dietary Laws* (Tübingen/Winona Lake, IN: Mohr Siebeck/Eisenbrauns, forthcoming).

37 Volokhine, »Prohibitions«. He continues (»ibid.«): »It is important to emphasize that everything we know about dietary restrictions must be considered in the context of a specific time (i. e., a fixed period) and/or place (i. e., a specific region and/or temple area). In effect, there is no dietary prohibition in Egypt that has a *general* value, being either collective or permanent.«

38 »Ibid«. Herodotus 2.37.47 views Egyptians food prohibitions through the lens of the Pythagoreans, who ate no beans, cf. this problematic claim for the Egyptians in Herodotus 2.37.5.

39 Intriguing for interpretation of Gen 43 is Herodotus' discussion in 2.41 concerning the Egyptian refusal to use Greek vessels or utensils due to their possible contact with bulls, because Herodotus incorrectly states that Egyptians sacrificed all bulls. Therefore, perhaps the redactor is simply interpreting the situation through Greek eyes, with Greek concerns? Cf. Levin, *Jahwist*, 297.

40 Cf. Pinker, »Abomination«: 160. He likewise notes the problem with identifying the meat as the issue. He argues that the garments of the Hebrews, made of wool, became especially malodorous, so the Egyptians would have eschewed contact. This still does not explain Joseph's separate table.

Several broad parallel texts may provide insight. Perhaps the most helpful Egyptian source is the stela of Piânkhy, a Nubian pharaoh from the 25th Dynasty, around 725 BCE, which reports of vanquished enemies turned away at the gate because they were impure, possibly having something to do with circumcision, and because they ate fish.⁴¹ Thus, *if the emic perspective of Egyptians* is important for Gen 43:32, which is not at all certain, then the abomination in *this verse* could have something to do with the specific nature of Joseph's house, which as son-in-law of a priest and as second to Pharaoh in the kingdom, could be equated to the protected space of a temple, demanding a special state of purity.⁴² In this case, the Egyptians follow appropriate Egyptian protocol and separate from the foreigners. If this direction is accepted, then Joseph in fact makes a profound move in allowing the Hebrews to dine in the house, thereby engendering their homage even more deeply, undergirding his role as their patron and foreshadowing his self-identification as their Hebrew brother.⁴³

4 The Cup

Finally, the cup found in Gen 44 (absent in Gen 43) offers some further support to this argument. The cup of the ruler plays a very significant role in Persian feasting. While not the only value-added imperial gift given by Persian emperors, »Drinking cups did strike the Greeks as a feature of the Achaemenid environment ...«.⁴⁴ Read in the context of the Persian period, the cup becomes an intriguing symbol. Only implied in the drinking of Gen 43, the cup becomes the focus of chap. 44. One particularly important observation is that it was not stolen, but given. As a gift, it represents favor, which is true to the nature of Joseph's view of Benjamin: Joseph treasures his full brother, giving him both five portions at the table and his cup. The portion and cup also continue the theme of favoritism in the story,

⁴¹ Sarah Schellinger, »The Victory Stela of Piankhi (Ca. 725 BCE),« in *Milestone Documents in World History: Exploring the Primary Sources That Shaped the Earth, Vol. I 2350 BCE – 1058 CE*, ed. Brian Bonhomme (Dallas: Schlager, 2010). Similar to Lev 11–15 and the use of תועבה in Deuteronomy, impurity appears in funerary contexts of the Book of the Dead 148, e. g. with regard to dietary prohibitions and refraining from sexual intercourse.

⁴² This direction receives mitigated support from the much later Porphyry, *De abstinence*, 4.6., that Egyptian priests did not associate with anyone who was not of a religious character.

⁴³ For the brothers are in fact let into the house—several times in the final form.

⁴⁴ Erich S. Gruen, *Cultural Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Los Angeles: Getty, 2011), 161. He notes, »Drinking cups did strike Greeks as a feature of the Achaemenid environment but this hardly demonstrates that every silver or gold cup is a royal gift.«

testing the brothers' reaction.⁴⁵ Finally, Joseph's divination with the cup may have allowed him to foresee Judah's positive response,⁴⁶ allowing for reconciliation—albeit with a maintenance of hierarchy that continues until Gen 50:15–21. Thus the cup serves as a continuing reminder of the reconciliation enacted at table and confirmed through the actions on the following day. Furthermore, the cup signifies the continuation of the largely patron-client dynamic from the meal.

Joseph tests his brothers' character in two ways: First they drink together, and on the day after, Joseph checks to see if their commensal loyalty was durable through the ruse of the cup in Benjamin's sack.⁴⁷

5 Summary

This essay has argued that as a composite text, the feast in Gen 43 and ruse of the cup in Gen 44 play a significant role in the enactment of Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers while maintaining patron status over them.

The numerous elements of the banquet, from the lack of invitation, the choice menu in a time of hunger, the seating arrangements, the portions, and perhaps even Joseph's identification with the brothers despite their abomination to the Egyptians, serve to support this complex dance of commensal consumption as a combination of a patron-role and diacritical feast, also in ways that allude to the brothers' feast in Gen 37.

In composition-critical terms, the original text, which also contains many features that fit easily into a Persian setting, focuses far more on the issue of the

⁴⁵ An alternative, non-mutually exclusive explanation is that the incident surrounding the cup leads the brothers to feel what their father felt when he lost Joseph. Benjamin was equal to their own children (see the interaction with Jacob in chap. 43). If they lose Benjamin, they lose a brother and also lose their father and possibly one of their children. The cup incident leads to empathy, which transforms these characters. Thanks to Safwat Marzouk (personal communication) for this perspective.

⁴⁶ Armin Lange, »Becherorakel und Traumdeutung: Zu zwei Formen der Divination in der Josephsgeschichte,« in *Studies in the Book of Genesis: Literature, Redaction and History*, ed. André Wénin, BETL 155 (Leuven: Peeters, 2001): 371–379, here 372, notes that divination through augury was common throughout the ancient Near East but did not appear in Egypt before the Hellenistic period.

⁴⁷ Cf. the portrayal by Herodotus 1.133. Note also that the Royal Persian Table was less a place for commensality than for the bringing of tribute, much like the brothers seem to expect in Gen 43:25 and 26. Cf. Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg, »Gifts in the Persian Empire,« in *Le Tribut dans l'empire Perse: Actes de la Table Ronde de Paris, 12–13 Décembre 1986*, eds. Pierre Briant and Clarisse Hersenschmidt, Travaux de l'Institut d'Etudes Iraniennes de l'Université de La Sorbonne Nouvelle 13 (Paris: Peeters, 1989): 129–146, here 133.

reconciliation of Joseph with his brothers and the maintenance of his role.⁴⁸ The narrative depicts Joseph as using the feast to solidify his role as patron over his brothers. Similarly his »gift« of the cup in chap. 44 embodies symbolic favor for his full brother Benjamin in a way that he, as the patron, expects his clients—the ten brothers—to embrace.

However, because Egypt was an ever-present entity for Israel, Judah, and the Jews as both a menace and a refuge, redactors from various centuries proceed to identify their experience of Egypt, colored by their cultural feasting practices, in a text depicting cross-cultural Hebrew-Egyptian feasting in a manner that both brought the two together and maintained the tension between them. As such, at a later point the question of Hebrew versus Egyptian separation at the table enters the text. This is an element that strongly reflects issues that interest Greeks. In fact, though the stela of Piânkhry records the importance of purity concerns far earlier, there are several striking similarities with Greek memories of Persian and Egyptian feasting. The themes of three groups of banqueters and the significance of a royally gifted cup indicate striking resemblance with depictions of Persian royal feast, pointing to the importance of this context for some layers of the text.

Abstract: This investigation of the composite text of the feast in Gen 43 explores how Joseph's banquet with his brothers—and the placement of Joseph's cup in Gen 44—functions as performative action in establishing the relationships between the commensal parties. In this way, the feast takes part in the larger story's narrative thread of the complex reconciliation of the brothers. The argument explores the nature of this meal from several angles: (1) insights provided by anthropological theory on power dynamics at feasts, (2) illumination cast by ancient comparative texts, especially related to Persian feasting, and (3) light shed on the feast's meaning by the significance of the cup in Persian feasts, given the cup's role in Gen 44 to concretize the feast's performative action in Gen 43:31–34.

Zusammenfassung: Diese Untersuchung der aus unterschiedlichen literarischen Schichten bestehenden Erzählung von Josefs Mahl mit seinen Brüdern in Gen 43 arbeitet heraus, wie das Mahl gemeinsam mit dem Motiv des Versteckens von Josefs Becher in Gen 44 als performativer Handlung der Bestimmung der Beziehungen unter den Teilnehmenden dient. So erscheint Gen 43 als zentraler Teil des

⁴⁸ Thus, it may be that this tradition dates back far earlier given Joseph's prominence, though this could be a premature attempt at historical identification of the hero with historical-political realities that do not respect the literary character of the narrative. It may, therefore, also be that the text reflects postexilic origins.

langen Erzählwegs hin zur Versöhnung der Brüder. Die Untersuchung betrachtet das Mahl in Gen 43 in drei Dimensionen: 1. aus anthropologischer Sicht Untersuchungen zu Machtverhältnissen bei Festmählern, 2. in der Perspektive vergleichbarer Texte des Alten Orients, insbesondere der Darstellungen persischer Festmähler und 3. vor dem Hintergrund der Bedeutung des Kelches bei persischen Festen und Mählern. Letztere nimmt vor allem die Bedeutung der Rolle des Kelches in Gen 44 als Verstärkung der performativen Handlung in Gen 43,31–34 in den Blick.

Résumé: Cette investigation du texte composite de Gn 43 explore comment le banquet de Joseph avec ses frères, et le placement de la coupe de Joseph en Gn 44 fonctionnent comme actions performatives, établissant les relations entre commensaux. De cette manière, le festin prend place dans le fil narratif plus large de la réconciliation complexe entre les frères. L'article explore la nature du repas sous différents angles: (1) la théorie anthropologique de la dynamique du pouvoir lors des festins, (2) la comparaison avec d'anciens textes liés à la pratique du festin perse, (3) l'importance de la coupe dans les festins perses, qui permet de comprendre le rôle de la coupe en Gn 44, à savoir de concrétiser l'action performative du festin en Gn 43.31–34.